

Psychological Distress in Young People in Australia

Fifth Biennial Youth Mental
Health Report: 2012-2020

Summary Booklet

**MISSION
AUSTRALIA**

In association with



**Black Dog
Institute**



Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands throughout Australia and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land and we recognise the importance of the young people who are our future leaders.

A special thank you to the young people who shared with us, via the 2020 Youth Survey, their

responses on current issues and state of their mental health.

We would like to thank Professor Andrew MacKinnon from Black Dog Institute for his consultation on some of the statistical analysis. We would also like to thank Megan Boshell, Troy Crellin and Lacey Willett for their assistance and providing guidance and direction, and to the Mission Australia staff who contributed to this report by providing helpful insights, feedback, design and support.

ISBN: 978-1-875357-28-4
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This report may be cited as: Brennan, N., Beames, J. R., Kos, A., Reily, N., Connell, C., Hall, S., Yip, D., Hudson, J., O'Dea, B., Di Nicola, K., and Christie, R. (2021) Psychological Distress in Young People in Australia Fifth Biennial Youth Mental Health Report: 2012-2020. Mission Australia: Sydney, NSW.

Executive summary

The Mission Australia *Youth Survey* is the largest annual survey of young people of its kind in Australia, attracting thousands of respondents each year and providing valuable insights into the issues and concerns affecting young people. In 2020, Mission Australia conducted its 19th annual survey, receiving 25,800 responses from young people aged 15 to 19 years. The *Youth Survey 2020* was conducted between April and August 2020, when much of the country was in a stage of government enforced lockdown, or just emerging from lockdown due to COVID-19.

One of the questions the *Youth Survey* has included since 2012 measures the levels of psychological distress experienced by young people. The purpose of this report is two-fold. First, we describe trends in distress levels over time from 2012 to 2020. Then, focusing on 2020 data, we shed light on the characteristics of young people living with psychological distress, explore the links between psychological distress and experiences in daily life, and identify barriers that might prevent them from seeking help when they need it.

This is the fifth national report on young people's mental health produced by Mission Australia and the Black Dog Institute. This ongoing collaboration has brought many fresh insights into the youth mental health space — with implications for both policy and practice.



Key findings

There has been an increase in the proportion of young people with psychological distress in Australia. In 2012, 18.6% of respondents to the Youth Survey had psychological distress, and this increased to 26.6% in 2020.

Prevalence of psychological distress was higher for:

- Young people who identified as female or non-binary compared to young people who identified as male. The prevalence of psychological distress has increased over time at a proportionally greater rate for females compared to males.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people compared to non-Indigenous young people.
- Young people with disabilities (including mental illness) compared to young people without disabilities.

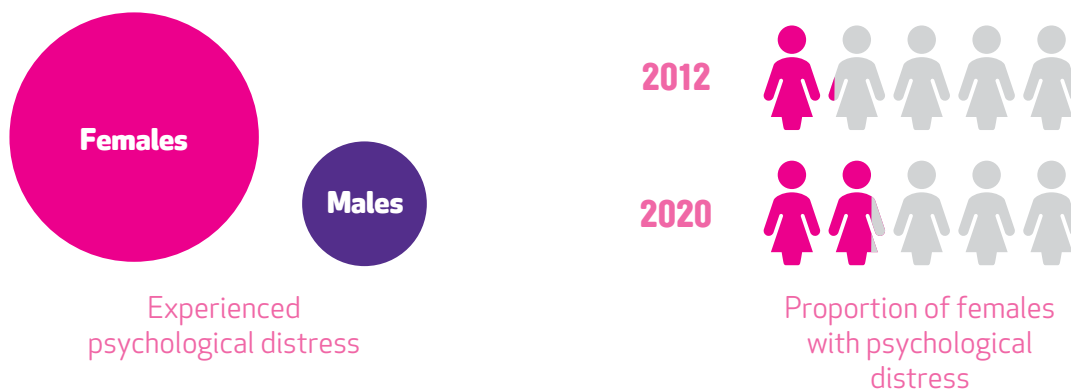
Rate of psychological distress over time

In 2012, it was close to one in five (18.6%) young people reporting psychological distress and in 2020, it is over a quarter (26.6%).



Gender difference

Twice as many females compared to males experienced psychological distress since 2012. While both proportions have risen between 2012 and 2020, the proportion of females with psychological distress has shown a much greater increase (11.7%) – from over one fifth (22.4%) in 2012 to over one third (34.1%) in 2020.



Key findings (CONT)

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander difference

Across all years, a higher proportion (on average 8.0%) of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people reported experiencing psychological distress than non-Indigenous young people. The proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people with psychological distress rose by 5.6% – from 28.4% in 2012 to 34.0% in 2020.



Disability difference

Since 2012, a higher proportion of young people with disabilities experienced psychological distress than young people who did not have disabilities. The proportion of young people with disabilities and psychological distress rose by 10.9% – from 32.1% in 2012 to 43.0% in 2020.



Lifestyle factors

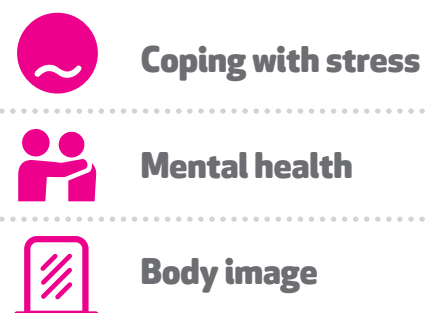
Young people with psychological distress are likely to experience poorer sleep and exercise outcomes than young people without psychological distress. Questions on lifestyle were included in the survey for the first time, revealing that young people in Australia with psychological distress were approximately three times as likely to report they were getting six hours or less of sleep per night and twice as likely to report they were doing no exercise.



Young people with psychological distress

Top three issues of concern and unfair treatment

The top issues of concern for young people were coping with stress, mental health and body image. Young people in Australia with psychological distress were more than twice as likely to indicate that these issues were of concern than those without psychological distress. Questions on unfair treatment were a new addition to the 2020 survey, and results indicated that young people with psychological distress were more than twice as likely to report experience of unfair treatment due to their mental health and sexuality than those without psychological distress.



Key findings (CONT)

Top sources of help and main barriers to seeking help

Young people reported that they most commonly sought help from **friend/s**, followed by **parent/s or guardian/s**. For young people with psychological distress, the third most common source of help was the *internet*, while for young people without psychological distress, it was *relative/family friend*. Over half of young people with psychological distress reported being 'scared/anxious' to get help, 'feeling embarrassed', 'feeling I can deal with it myself', and 'not knowing what kind of help I need' as barriers to seeking help.

Top three sources of help
(for young people with psychological distress)



Friend/s



Parent/s or guardian/s



Internet

Top three barriers to seeking help
(for young people with psychological distress)



Scared/anxious to get help



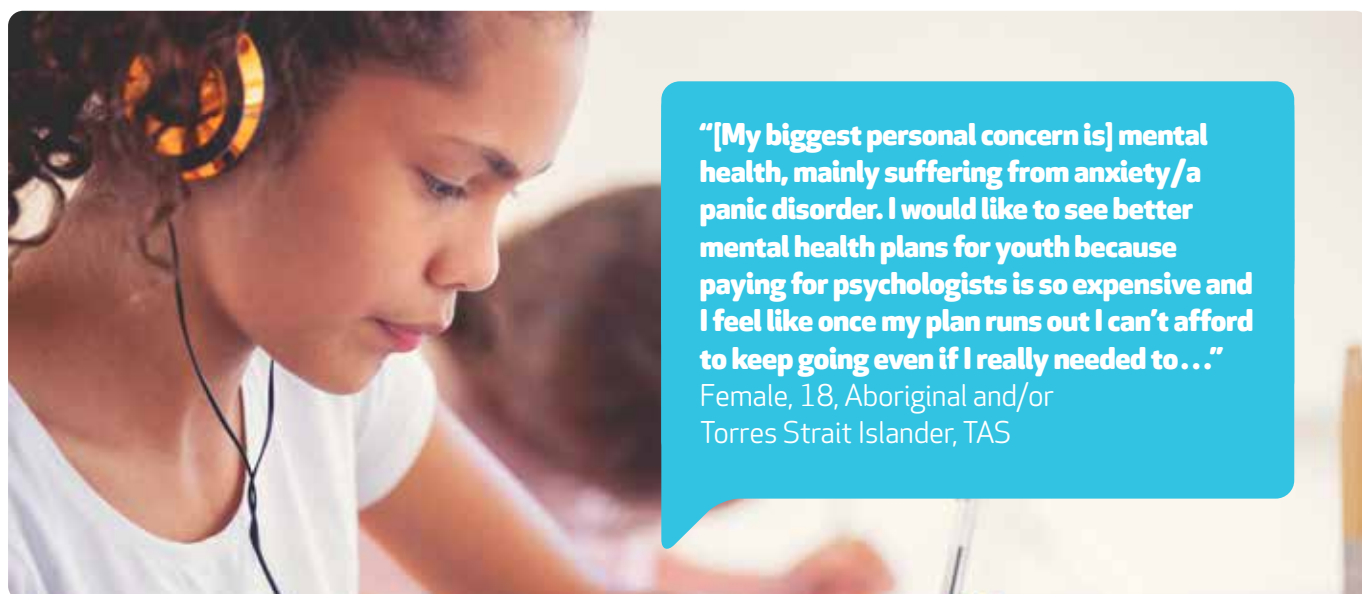
Feeling embarrassed



Feeling I can deal with it myself

The findings of this report have a range of implications for policy and practice. They provide insights into issues and preferences of young people that can inform more accessible interventions, such as digital solutions. They demonstrate the strong need for investment in our mental health workforce and focus on schools as key sites for universal and targeted evidence-based programs.

The findings also support the need for further research, such as ways to better equip young people's family and friends to help. As psychological distress appears to be heightened during COVID-19 compared to pre-pandemic levels¹, there is even greater urgency for all levels of governments to protect the mental health of young people to ensure the best possible transition to a post-pandemic world.



"[My biggest personal concern is] mental health, mainly suffering from anxiety/a panic disorder. I would like to see better mental health plans for youth because paying for psychologists is so expensive and I feel like once my plan runs out I can't afford to keep going even if I really needed to..."

Female, 18, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, TAS

¹ Li et al. (2021)

Policy and practice recommendations:

- 1** Implement standardised national mental health screening in schools to build a universal system for identifying and responding to young people's mental health issues
- 2** Develop national regulatory guidelines for evidence-based mental health and wellbeing programs in schools to ensure the provision of effective and evidence-based mental health supports for students
- 3** Fund research into evidence-based solutions that peers and parents can use to effectively support young people
- 4** Further invest in evidence-based digital mental health services to increase their reach and accessibility for young people
- 5** Remove barriers to accessing clinically trained school counsellors in all schools to improve access to high quality, effective and evidence-based treatment for students
- 6** Increase the capacity of the broader mental health workforce to cope with the increased prevalence of psychological distress in young people and ensure that they can access mental health services external to schools where needed
- 7** Fund research to understand the increase in psychological distress in young women and develop and implement relevant programs and supports
- 8** Increase culturally safe services for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people
- 9** Increase tailored services for non-binary young people and the broader LGBTIQ+ youth community

Message for...

YOUNG PEOPLE

Seek help in ways that best suit you. Know there are people ready to help. Get involved in opportunities to make mental health supports better.

FAMILIES

Many young people rely on their families for advice and support. Learn about the best ways to help support young people with their mental health. There are services that can support young people and help to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

SCHOOLS

Schools, teachers and other staff are vital supports for young people's mental health. Invest in evidence-based mental health programs. Create the conditions where students feel safe to seek help and are supported when they do.

POLICYMAKERS

Implement evidence-based changes to mental health service delivery, tailored to young people's needs. Adequately fund the mental health system to meet the growing demand for youth-specific mental health services. Involve young people in policy design.

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SERVICE PROVIDERS

See young people as the experts in their own lives and involve them in service delivery and design. Stay up to date on the latest mental health training and evidence. Think innovatively about how to support young people's mental health needs.

BUSINESSES

Make workplaces safe for young people and support their mental health and wellbeing. Involve young people in discussions about what mental health and wellbeing supports they need.

MEDIA

Tell young people's stories in compassionate ways that acknowledge their unique issues and strengths.

RESEARCHERS

Involve young people in the design and evaluation of mental health solutions.

**We stand together
with Australians in
need, until they can
stand for themselves**

Contact us

For further information please contact
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**If you are a young person and need someone to talk with, you can
contact Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 (24/7) kidshelpline.com.au**

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